

R 221700Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5783
INFO AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE
AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN
AMCONSUL DURBAN
AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG

C O N F I D E N T I A L PRETORIA 002096

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2018

TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: ANC MAY TAP KGALEMA MOTLANTHE FOR ACTING PRESIDENT

REF: A. PRETORIA 2079

[1](#)B. PRETORIA 2080

Classified By: Political Counselor Raymond L. Brown. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) There are strong indications the African National Congress (ANC) Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe may replace President Thabo Mbeki on an acting basis until elections are held within seven months. (Note: Mbeki in a nationally televised speech on September 21 agreed to abide by the ANC decision to replace him and will step down after all legal and constitutional obstacles for his resignation can be met. End Note.) ANC President Jacob Zuma in a September 22 press conference did not officially confirm Motlanthe would assume the presidency. However, Zuma strongly implied Motlanthe would be a good choice for acting president and would have the support of the ANC if Parliament opted to nominate the ANC deputy. Parliament is expected to elect a new President on September 25, according to press reports.

[1](#)2. (SBU) There is no constitutional guidance on what procedures would follow the voluntary resignation of a president, giving the ANC the chance to replace Mbeki with its own choice as approved by Parliament without calling for early elections. The ANC appears to have opted for the so-called "British model" to give the party time to unify and ease international concerns for a potential political crisis that could paralyze the government. The ANC probably would choose Motlanthe, long rumored to be the frontrunner to assume the presidency should ANC President Jacob Zuma be sidelined by legal troubles, to ease tensions between Mbeki loyalists and Zuma supporters. (Note: Zuma was recharged with corruption, money laundering, racketeering, and fraud charges in December 2007. The Pietermaritzburg High Court on September 12 ruled the decision to recharge Zuma was invalid and perhaps politically motivated by Mbeki. The ruling, and the state's subsequent decision to appeal that decision, contributed to the ANC decision to recall Mbeki over the weekend. End Note.) Motlanthe was recently appointed a Minister in the Presidency in order to become a second deputy president to facilitate the transition from Mbeki's to Zuma's administration and may be more palatable to more members of the ANC than other contenders such as party chairperson Baleka Mbete.

An Unassuming Leader In the Spotlight

[1](#)3. (SBU) ANC members view Motlanthe as wise and approachable and "always ready to listen to ordinary members," according to prominent journalist Karima Brown. However, Zuma's most ardent supporters are concerned that Motlanthe's name always comes up when options to Zuma are raised. Motlanthe was born in 1949, influenced by the Black Consciousness movement, and has long been viewed as the glue that holds the ANC's alliance with the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) together. He comes from a trade unionist background and served a 10-year sentence on Robben Island along with Govan Mbeki, the current President's father, and Nelson Mandela. Brown noted that Motlanthe is a "consummate politician who

plays his cards close to his chest." She said Motlanthe goes to great lengths to play down his role and concentrates on efforts to build relations with the many factions that compose the ANC. Earlier this year when asked if he would be interested in the country's top position, Motlanthe was interested in the country's top position, Motlanthe eschewed any possibility he would seek the post by noting he would rather run the ANC's political school -- but ended with traditional ANC formulae -- he would serve wherever the party asked him to. The current ANC deputy was instrumental in 2007 in securing an agreement between the public service unions and the state when Public Service and Administration Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, an Mbeki loyalist, could not come to terms with the labor movement.

Choice of Motlanthe Meant to Heal Rifts

¶4. (SBU) Although Mbete has been the rumored frontrunner for the interim presidency, the choice of Motlanthe would represent an effort to ease tensions between Mbeki loyalists and Zuma supporters. Prince Mashele, a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies with strong ANC connections, told Poloff on September 22 that if Mbete is chosen many of the Mbeki supporters would resign or leave the party. (Note: Minister in the Presidency, and close Mbeki ally, Essop Pahad along with Technology Minister Mosibudi Mangema announced plans on September 22 to resign with Mbeki when the South African leader leaves office. Pahad and

Mangema are the only two Cabinet ministers so far to have formally announced their intentions to resign. We also believe that Mbeki's legal advisor, Mojanku Gumbi, and his special envoy team to Zimbabwe would step down in solidarity with him -- e.g. Frank Chikane and Sydney Mufamadi. End Note.) Mashele noted that Mbete would be a safe choice for Zuma because she reportedly has no presidential aspirations at this time, but she would come with controversy. Mbete was elected to Parliament in 1994 but she raised eyebrows within the party when she accompanied Tony Yengeni, the party's former chief whip, to prison in a show of support after he was convicted of misleading Parliament for his role in the controversial 1998 arms deal. She was also in the headlines two years ago when she chartered a private plane -- at taxpayer expense -- to attend the inauguration of Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

Bio Note

¶5. (SBU) Motlanthe's efforts to downplay his political role also translate into a shielded political life. The ANC deputy is a self-confessed jazz enthusiast, according to Brown, and listens to the sounds of Duke Ellington, Phillip Miller, and Madeleine Peyroux. He lives in a gated golf community and drives a Jeep Cherokee. Motlanthe is married with three children even though it is often reported that he is single.

Comment

¶6. (C) The choice of Motlanthe would not be surprising as he has long been rumored to be ready should legal troubles sideline Zuma. Many ANC members are probably more comfortable with the ANC deputy than they would have been with Mbete. Cautious voices such as Motlanthe's failed to save Mbeki's job as national leader over the weekend as the party took the politically risky move of replacing Mbeki ahead of the polls next year. Louder voices in the ANC Youth League, COSATU, and SACP prevailed as more cautious voices within the ANC failed to speak up, perhaps because of their own political aspirations or perhaps because they believed it was time to put an end to the divisions that plagued the party since Zuma's firing as the deputy president in 2005.

(Note: Mbeki fired Zuma after his former deputy's friend, business and financial advisor was convicted of bribery. End Note.) Regardless, Motlanthe's track record and thoughtful approach to leadership likely positions him to begin healing rifts and preparing the party for elections in seven months. South Africa expected the new ANC acting president to be announced September 22. That did not happen and may not happen before the end of the week after Parliament reconvenes on September 23, 2008.

BOST